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MARVEL COMICS PRESENTS
CYCLOPS
FIGHTING FOR HIS LIFE AGAINST THE RETRIBUTION VIRUS!
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MARVEL® COMICS PRESENTS™

Cover by WALT SIMONSON

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Stan Lee Presents:

CYCLOPS "THE RETRIBUTION AFFAIR" 1

WRITER — Bob Harras
PENCILER — Ron Lim
INKER — Carol Riem
LETTERER — Agustin Mas
COLORIST — Andy Yanchus

"BEST LAID PLANS" — PART 5 OF 8

The sinister sentinel Master Mold has hypnotically forced Moira MacTaggert to create a deadly disease, the Retribution Virus, that will decimate the Earth's mutant population. Already two test subjects have been infected and only now is Scott Summers beginning to suspect the truth . . .

BLACK PANTHER "PANTHER'S QUEST" 9

WRITER — Don McGregor
PENCILER — Gene Colan
INKER — Tom Palmer
LETTERER — Joe Rosen
COLORIST — Mike Rockwitz

"JUSTIFIABLE ACTION" — PART 9 OF 25

The Black Panther's questioning of Sarah Slade is interrupted by a tear gas assault on the black township by South African security forces. Zanti Chikane tries to talk himself out of following a man he knows has been spying on the Slade's curio store, but finds himself further lured into the violent intrigue surrounding the Panther. And violent, indeed they are, for when Zanti returns, it is in time to witness the Panther being shot down in the town's streets.

PALADIN 17

WRITER — Scott Lobdell
PENCILER — Ron Wilson
INKER — Dan Adkins
LETTERER — Diana Albers
COLORIST — John A. Wilcox

"LET'S TAKE IT FROM WHERE I SWING IN AND RESCUE YOU. . ."

Don't ask him his real name, he won't tell you. He *will* tell you he's a super-strong, highly paid mercenary of mysterious origin. What he lacks in modesty and altruism, he makes up for in ego and arrogance. He's PALADIN — SUPER SOLDIER-OF-FORTUNE!

THE THING 25

WRITER — Marc McLaurin
PENCILER — Kevin VanHook
INKERS — David & Dan Day
LETTERER — Agustin Mas
COLORIST — Marc McLaurin

"THE FIRST CUT"

Ben Grimm had just taken command of The Fantastic Four, putting his tormented past and lost love behind him. He must help another to do the same, or die trying.

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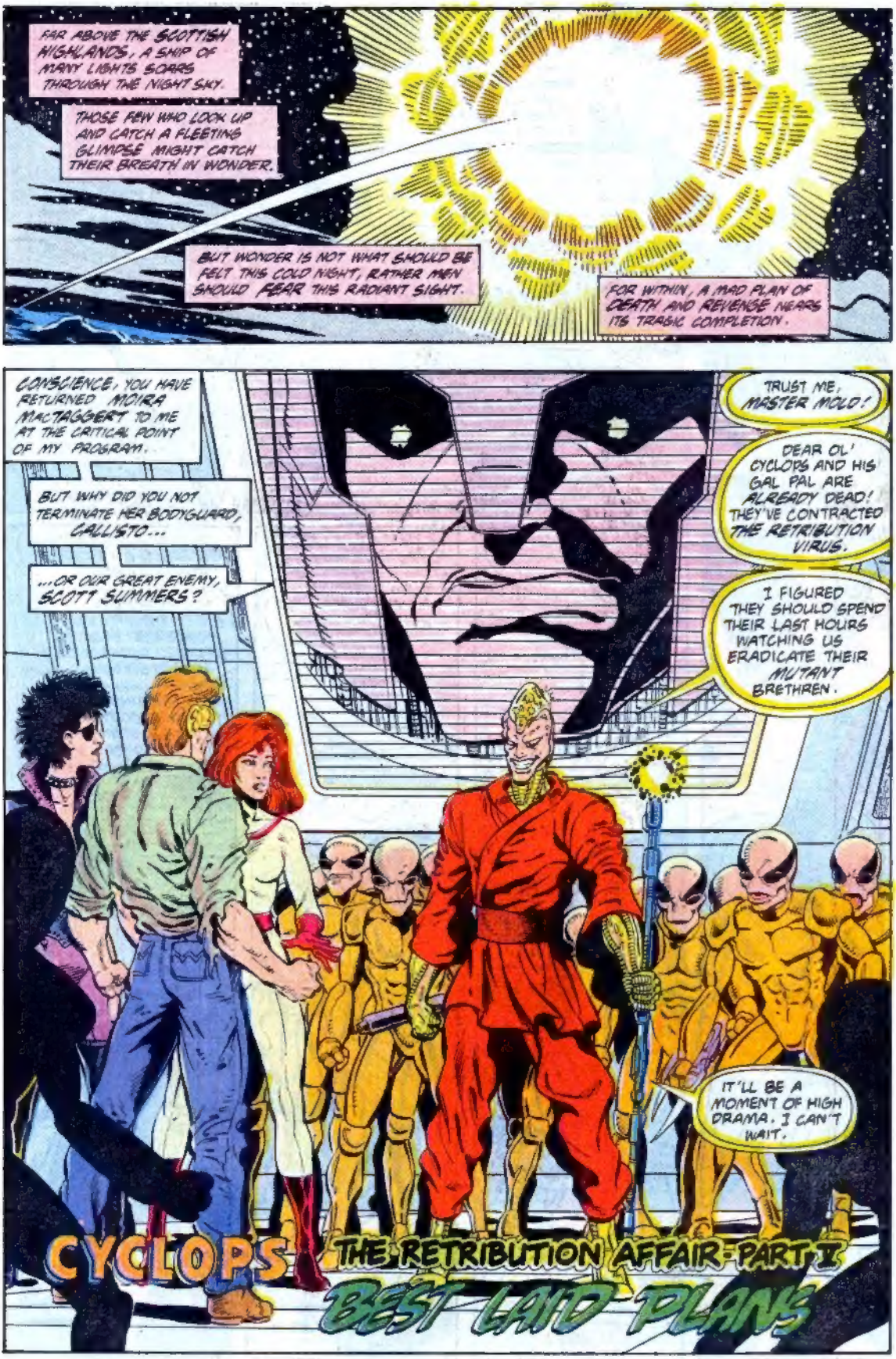
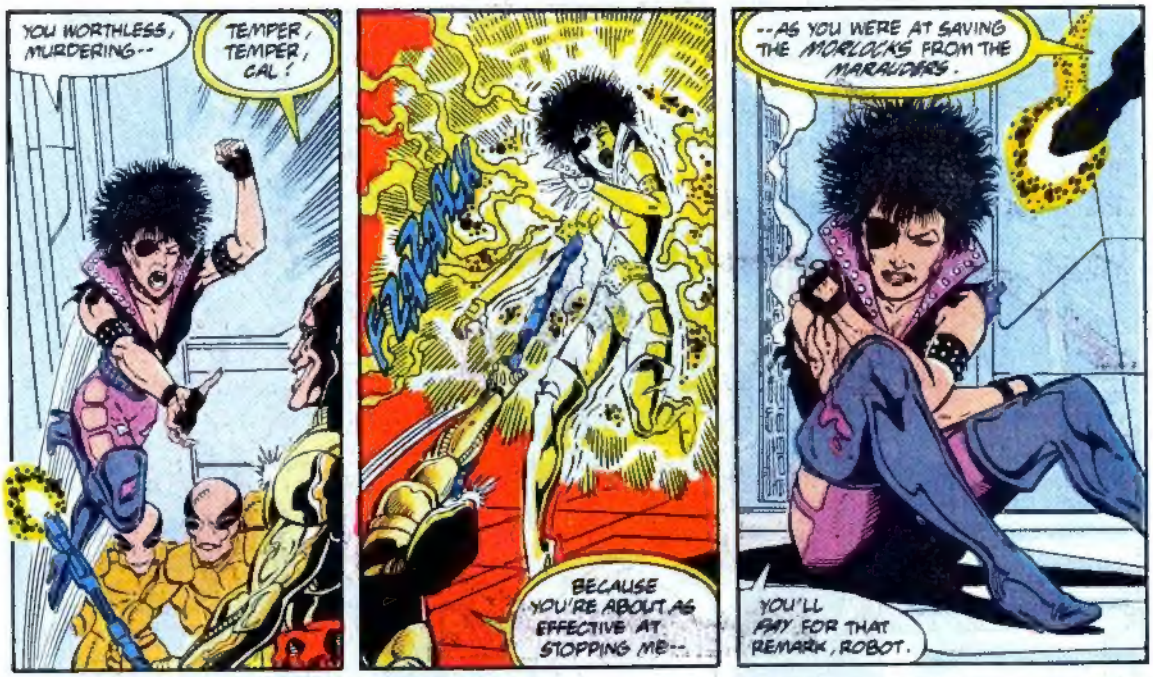
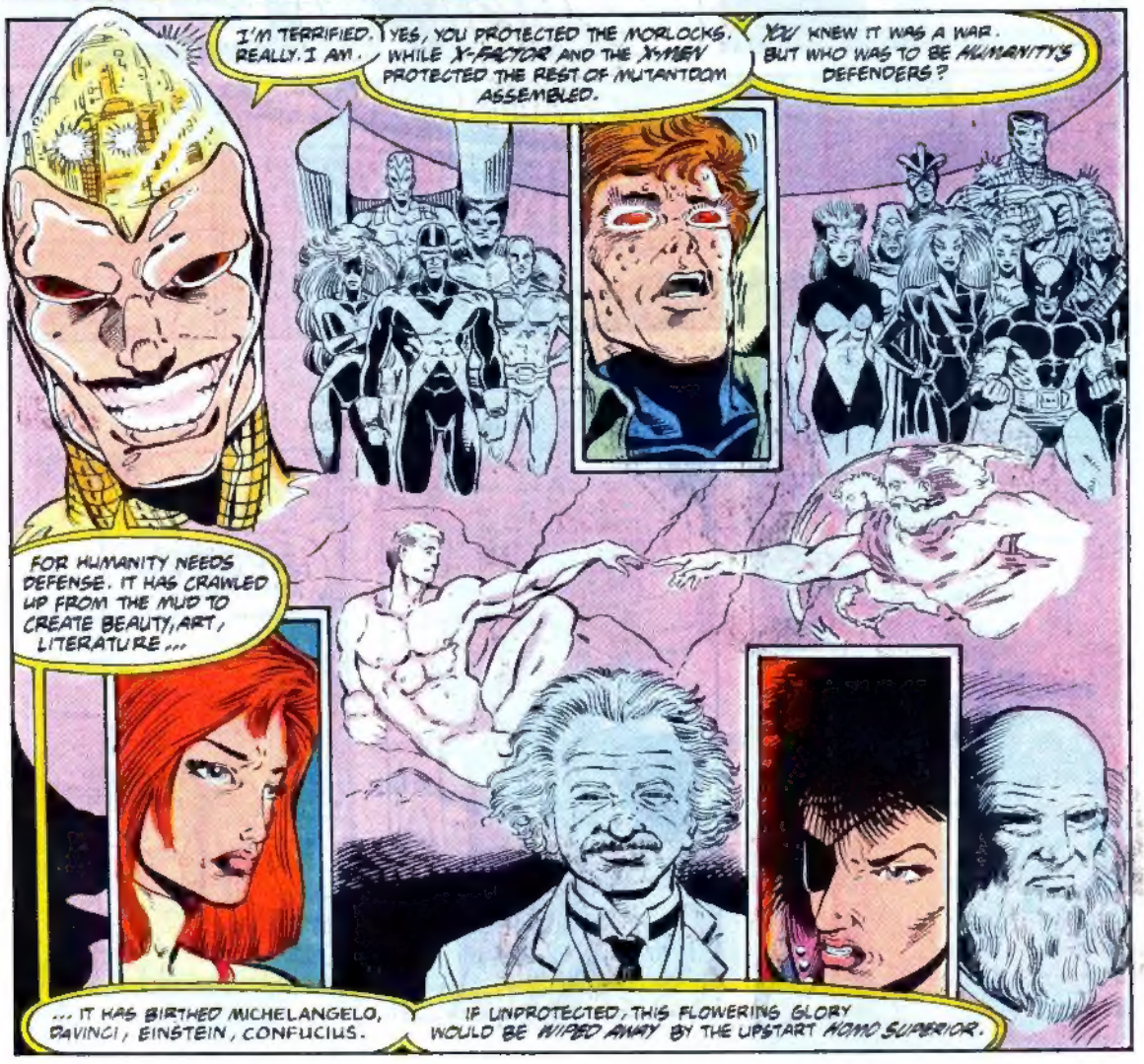

FAR ABOVE THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS, A SHIP OF MANY LIGHTS SOARS THROUGH THE NIGHT SKY.
THOSE FEW WHO LOOK UP AND CATCH A FLEETING GLIMPSE MIGHT CATCH THEIR BREATH IN WONDER.
BUT WONDER IS NOT WHAT SHOULD BE FELT THIS COLD NIGHT, RATHER MEN SHOULD FEAR THIS RADIANT SIGHT.
FOR WITHIN, A MAD PLAN OF DEATH AND REVENGE NEARS ITS TRAGIC COMPLETION.
CONSCIENCE, YOU HAVE RETURNED MOIRA MACTAGGERT TO ME AT THE CRITICAL POINT OF MY PROGRAM.
BUT WHY DID YOU NOT TERMINATE HER BODYGUARD, CALLISTO...
...OR OUR GREAT ENEMY, SCOTT SUMMERS?
TRUST ME, MASTER MOLD!
DEAR OL' CYCLOPS AND HIS GAL PAL ARE ALREADY DEAD! THEY'VE CONTRACTED THE RETRIBUTION VIRUS.
I FIGURED THEY SHOULD SPEND THEIR LAST HOURS WATCHING US ERADICATE THEIR MUTANT BRETHREN.
IT'LL BE A MOMENT OF HIGH DRAMA. I CAN'T WAIT.
CYCLOPS
THE RETRIBUTION AFFAIR PART I
BEST LAID PLANS

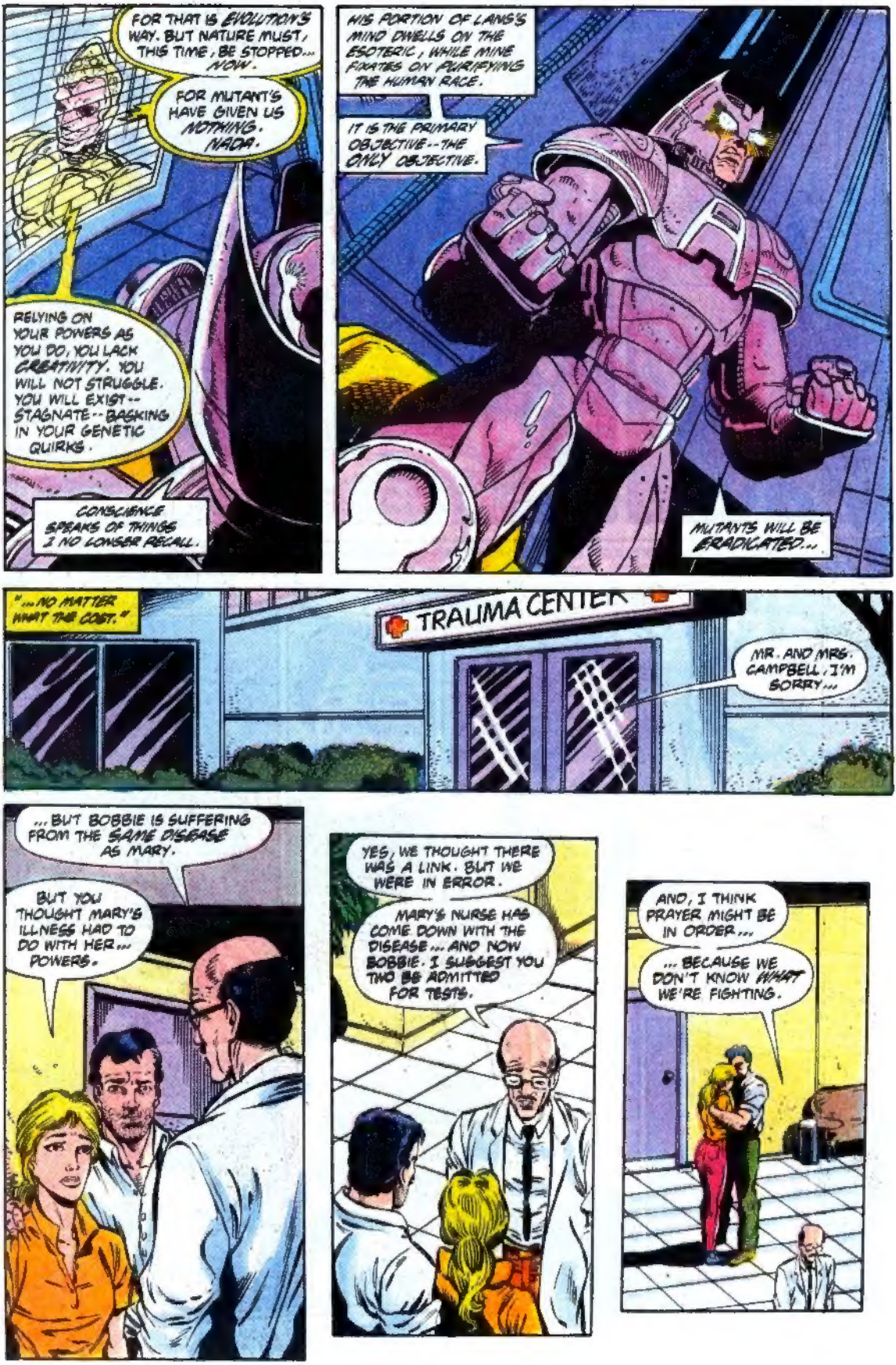
MASTER MOLD! YOU'RE BEHIND THIS!
I THOUGHT I DESTROYED YOU MONTHS AGO IN ALASKA!
I AM A SENTINEL, SUMMERS, THANKS TO YOU-- NOT A LIVING THING.
I CAN REBUILD MYSELF...OR HAVE DUPLICATES MADE. I CAN BE IN MANY PLACES AT ONCE...OR HIDE MY MIND IN THE SMALLEST OF TRANSISTORS.
SHUT UP, CONSCIENCE!
SHRAK!
OH ARRGH. OUCH. SPARE ME, PLEASE. NO MORE.
INSPIRING, AIN'T IT?
I HOPE I HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN A CLICHE.
AARGGHH
MY GUT... ON FIRE...
BUT YOU STILL KEEP ON TICKING. WHAT A GOOD LITTLE MUTANT YOU ARE, SCOTTIE.
WHO ARE YOU!?
MY ORIGIN! AT LAST, SOMEONE ASKED!
I AM A SENTINEL, BUILT BY MASTER MOLD WITH HIS OWN BRAIN ENGRAMS TO EASE HIS LONELINESS.
OF COURSE, HIS ENGRAMS ARE BASED ON THOSE OF STEPHEN LANG'S.
YOU REMEMBER STEVE-- THE MAN YOU MURDERED BECAUSE HE DARED PROTECT THE HUMAN SPECIES.
GETTING TIRED, SCOTTIE? VIRUS GETTING YOU DOWN?

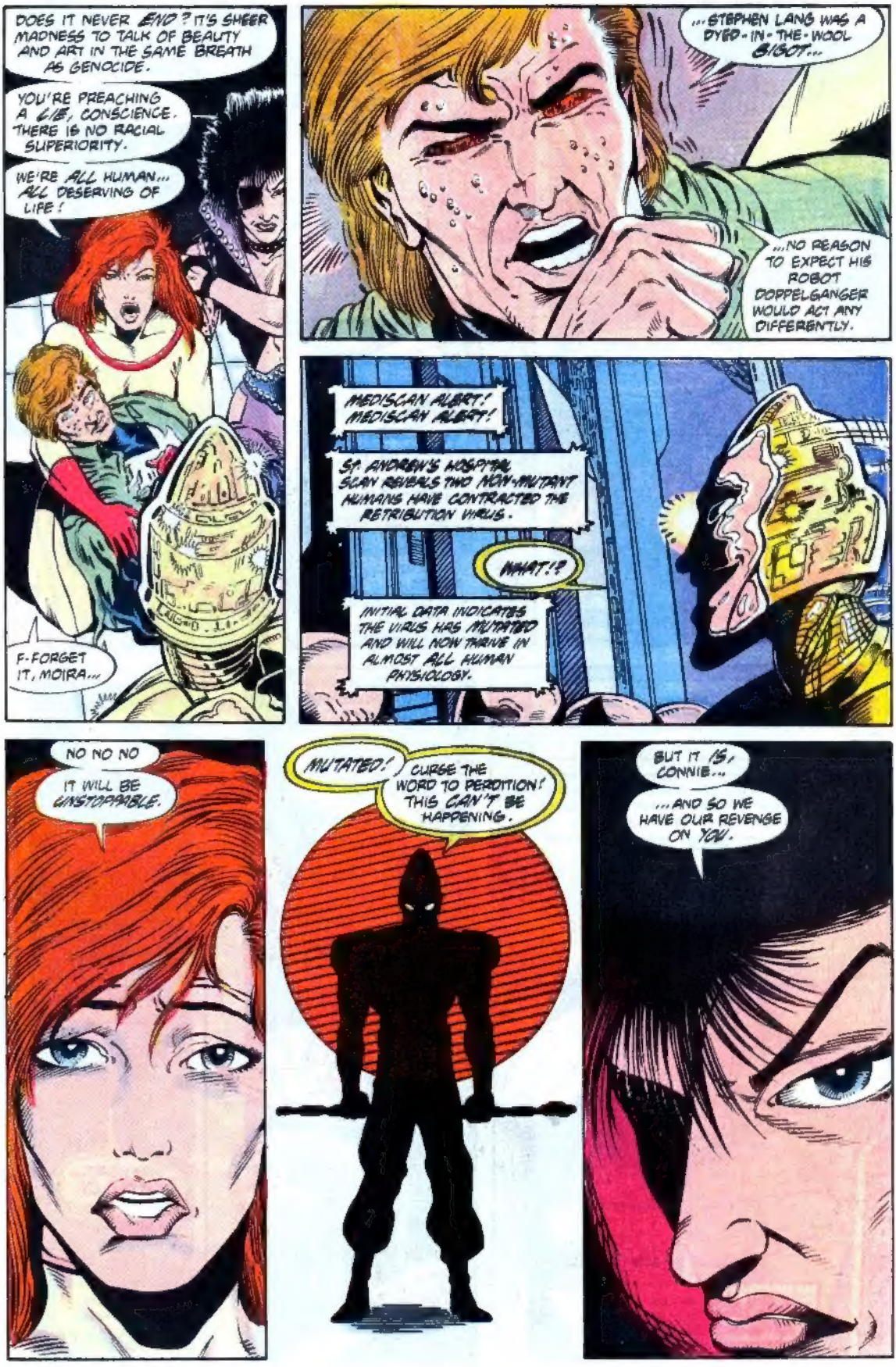
MY BEAM... WEAKENING...
EVERYTHING... SPINNING... NOT NOW... NOT NOW...
THUMP
MOIRA...THE VIRUS. IS HE--
HE'S BURNING UP. HIS SYSTEM IS TRYING TO FIGHT OFF THE VIRUS, BUT IT CAN'T!
OH, LADDIE, FORGIVE ME.
AN EFFECTIVE LITTLE KILLER WE FORCED YOU TO CREATE, SWEETIE.
AND IN JUST A FEW HOURS, WE RELEASE THE DEATH SPORES.
THINK OF IT... MUTIES EVERYWHERE WILL BE PUSHING UP DAISIES. KINDA MAKES YOU GLAD TO BE AMERICAN, DON'T IT?
MOIRA! HIS VISOR--!
DEAR HEAVEN, CAL, LOOK!
HIS EYES! HIS OPTIC POWER IS GONE!

THE HOME OF THE CAMPBELL FAMILY--
--UNTIL A FEW DAYS AGO, A HAPPY PLACE...
...BUT THEN THEIR YOUNGEST DAUGHTER TOOK DEATHLY ILL AND VANISHED INTO THE NIGHT.
IT IS ALMOST MORE THAN A COUPLE CAN TAKE...
...BUT FATE CAN BE CRUEL.
I CAN'T BELIEVE ANY OF IT. MARY GONE... AND THE DOCTORS SAYIN' SHE MIGHT BE A... A... MUTANT...
DON'T TALK SO! WE'LL FIND HER. AND WE HAVE TO BE STRONG FOR BOBBIE.
MUM, I DON'T FEEL SO WELL.
BOBBIE! NO! NOT AGAIN!
WHAT'S HAPPENED TO CYCLOPS' CONSCIENCE?
SO STRIDENT, CAL! MY HORMONES WOULD BE IN AN UPROAR IF I HAD ANY.
MY EYES-- HOW?
A SIDE EFFECT OF THE RETRIBUTION VIRUS, SCOTTIE...
...AS YOU DIE, YOUR MUTANT POWER FADES.
CONGRATS, OL' BOY, YOU'RE GOING TO DIE ALMOST HUMAN.


YOU WORTHLESS, MURDERING--
TEMPER, TEMPER, CAL!
ZZZZAAAK!!
BECAUSE YOU'RE ABOUT AS EFFECTIVE AT STOPPING ME--
--AS YOU WERE AT SAVING THE MORLOCKS FROM THE MARAUDERS.
YOU'LL PAY FOR THAT REMARK, ROBOT.


I'M TERRIFIED. REALLY. I AM.
YES, YOU PROTECTED THE MORLOCKS. WHILE X-FACTOR AND THE X-MEN PROTECTED THE REST OF MUTANTDOM ASSEMBLED.
YOU KNEW IT WAS A WAR. BUT WHO WAS TO BE HUMANITY'S DEFENDERS?
FOR HUMANITY NEEDS DEFENSE. IT HAS CRAWLED UP FROM THE MUD TO CREATE BEAUTY, ART, LITERATURE...
... IT HAS BIRTHED MICHELANGELO, DAVINCI, EINSTEIN, CONFUCIUS.
IF UNPROTECTED, THIS FLOWERING GLORY WOULD BE WIPED AWAY BY THE UPSTART HOMO SUPERIOR.


FOR THAT IS EVOLUTION'S WAY. BUT NATURE MUST, THIS TIME, BE STOPPED... NOW.
FOR MUTANT'S HAVE GIVEN US NOTHING. NADA.
RELYING ON YOUR POWERS AS YOU DO, YOU LACK CREATIVITY. YOU WILL NOT STRUGGLE. YOU WILL EXIST--STAGNATE--BASKING IN YOUR GENETIC QUIRKS.
CONSCIENCE SPEAKS OF THINGS I NO LONGER RECALL.
HIS PORTION OF LANG'S MIND DWELLS ON THE ESOTERIC, WHILE MINE FIXATES ON PURIFYING THE HUMAN RACE.
IT IS THE PRIMARY OBJECTIVE--THE ONLY OBJECTIVE.
MUTANTS WILL BE ERADICATED...
"...NO MATTER WHAT THE COST."
TRAUMA CENTER
MR. AND MRS. CAMPBELL, I'M SORRY...
...BUT BOBBIE IS SUFFERING FROM THE SAME DISEASE AS MARY.
BUT YOU THOUGHT MARY'S ILLNESS HAD TO DO WITH HER... POWERS.
YES, WE THOUGHT THERE WAS A LINK. BUT WE WERE IN ERROR.
MARY'S NURSE HAS COME DOWN WITH THE DISEASE... AND NOW BOBBIE. I SUGGEST YOU TWO BE ADMITTED FOR TESTS.
AND, I THINK PRAYER MIGHT BE IN ORDER...
...BECAUSE WE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE'RE FIGHTING.


DOES IT NEVER END? IT'S SHEER MADNESS TO TALK OF BEAUTY AND ART IN THE SAME BREATH AS GENOCIDE.
YOU'RE PREACHING A LIE, CONSCIENCE. THERE IS NO RACIAL SUPERIORITY.
WE'RE ALL HUMAN... ALL DESERVING OF LIFE!
F-FORGET IT, MOIRA...
...STEPHEN LANG WAS A DYED-IN-THE-WOOL BIGOT...
...NO REASON TO EXPECT HIS ROBOT DOPPELGANGER WOULD ACT ANY DIFFERENTLY.
MEDISCAN ALERT! MEDISCAN ALERT!
ST. ANDREW'S HOSPITAL SCAN REVEALS TWO NON-MUTANT HUMANS HAVE CONTRACTED THE RETRIBUTION VIRUS.
WHAT!?
INITIAL DATA INDICATES THE VIRUS HAS MUTATED AND WILL NOW THRIVE IN ALMOST ALL HUMAN PHYSIOLOGY.
NO NO NO
IT WILL BE UNSTOPPABLE.
MUTATED!
CURSE THE WORD TO PERDITION! THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING.
BUT IT IS, CONNIE...
...AND SO WE HAVE OUR REVENGE ON YOU.

AND...
MASTER MOLD, THE PLAN MUST BE ABANDONED.
THE DISEASE CAN BE CONTAINED AS LONG AS WE DO NOT RELEASE THE SPORES.
THE SPORES WILL BE RELEASED, AS PER SCHEDULE.
WHEN DID YOU ACQUIRE A SENSE OF HUMOR? THINGS HAVE CHANGED... HUMANS ARE THREATENED BY THE VIRUS!
MEDISCAN ESTIMATES THAT ONE HUNDRED PER CENT OF ALL MUTANTS WILL DIE, WHILE ONLY 92.4 PER CENT OF HUMANITY WILL DIE.
THE REMAINING 7.6 PERCENT WILL BE CAREFULLY WATCHED BY ME TO ENSURE NO FUTURE MUTANTS WILL BE BORN.
THE TOLL IS HEAVY, BUT AT TIMES INNOCENTS MUST DIE FOR GREATNESS TO THRIVE.
BUT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT BILLIONS! BILLIONS!
YOU DON'T THROW OUT THE BARREL BECAUSE OF A FEW BAD APPLES!
THE BABY DOESN'T HAVE TO GO OUT WITH THE BATH WATER!
THE... THE...
MY WORD... I'M OUT OF CLICHES...
CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE

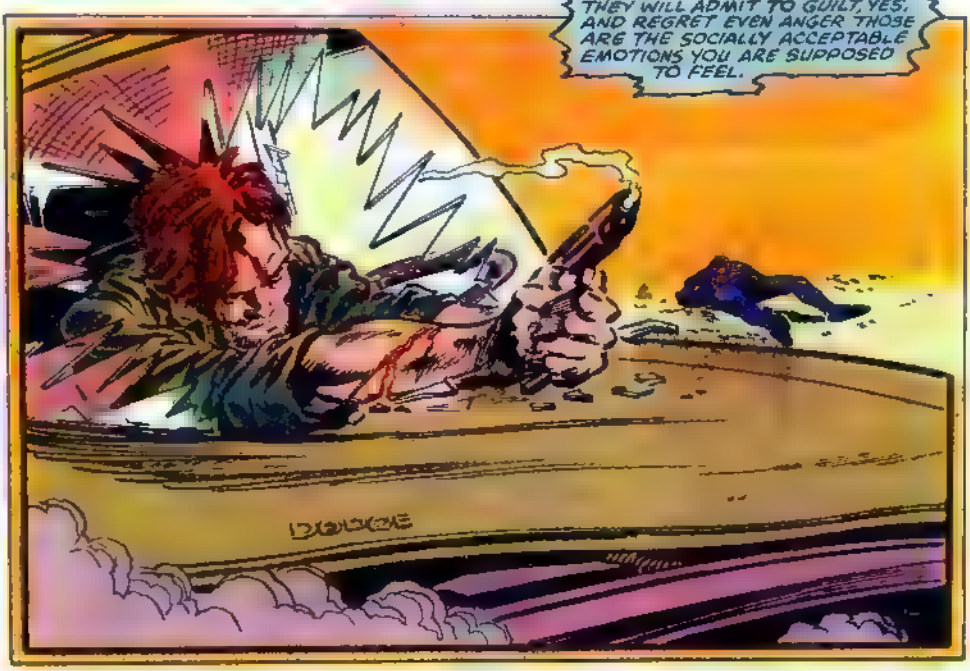
PANTHER'S QUEST

When Justice is over-ruled by Law
When Peace is attainable only by War
When Freedom is sabotaged by Organization
When God is only a device for immortality
When Progress is stifled by Traditional Ignorance

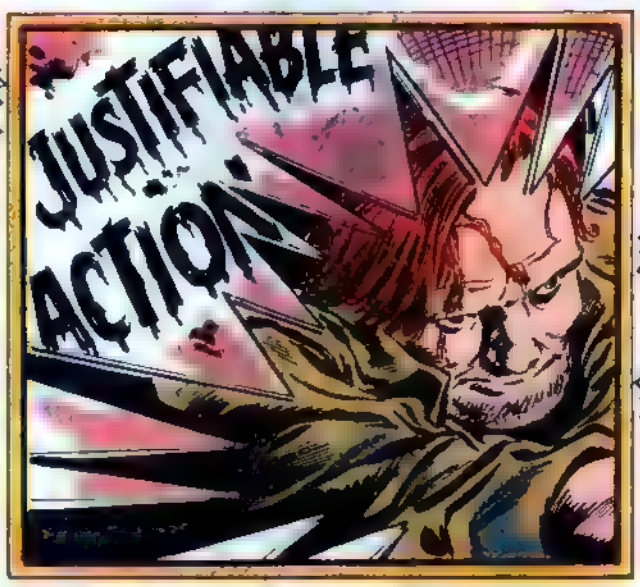
And Baby, these are any old time.
—From "The Mason Williams Reading Matter" by Mason Williams, Doubleday.

EUGENE VAN DER MERWE WOULD BE THE FIRST TO TELL YOU THAT MOST MEN WILL NOT TELL YOU ALL OF THE SURGE OF EMOTIONS THAT ARE EXPERIENCED IN THE AFTERMATH OF A KILLING.

PART IX
STARRING . THE BLACK PANTHER



BUT YOU WILL SELDOM HEAR OF THAT MOMENT OF EXHILARATION WHEN DANGER IS FACED--



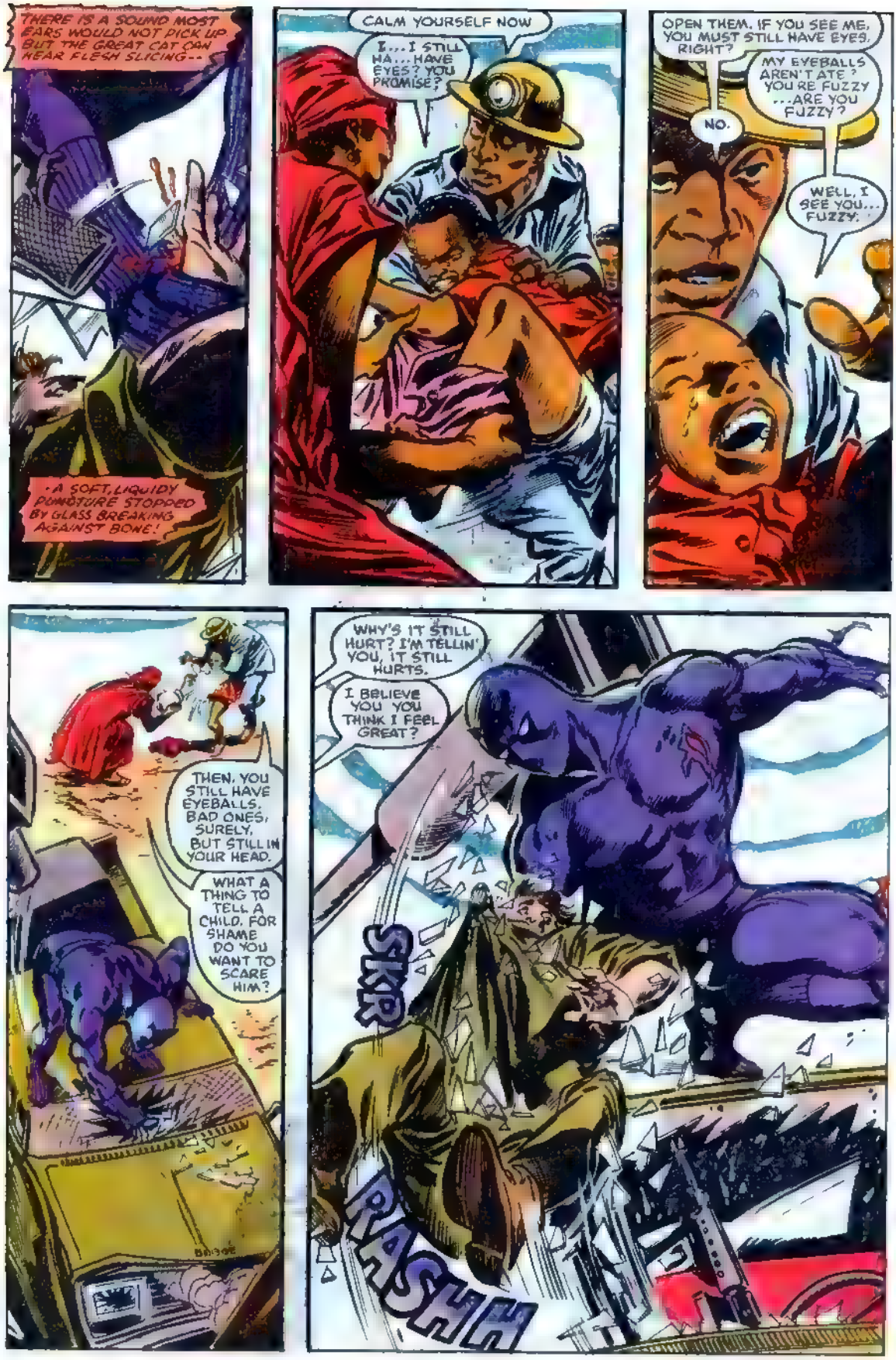
--WHEN THE TRIGGER IS SQUEEZED.

FOR EUGENE VAN DER MERWE THERE IS A SUDDEN RUSH OF ADRENALIN THAT IS UNLIKE THE EFFECTS OF ANY DRUG.

A CARBONATION IN THE ARTERIAL BLOODSTREAMS.

A THRILL OF BEING ON THE BRINK
LIFE AND DEATH ALL SPREAD OUT BEFORE YOU IN ONE INSTANT OF CLARITY
NOT TO BE DWELT UPON THEN, BUT ANALYZED LATER.
IT SETS YOU APART, BELONGING TO ANY KIND OF PARAMILITARY FORCE--
--OF BEING PART OF JUSTIFIABLE ACTION.
OF FACING THE ENEMY DOWN.
OF SURVIVING.
AND OF THE KILL!
WHAT THE--?
HE'S... GETTING UP?
YOU CANNOT GO BACK TO BEING COMPLETELY ORDINARY EVER AGAIN ONCE YOU HAVE UNDERGONE THAT BLOOD RITUAL.

A BULLET DOES NOT HAVE TO HIT THE HEAD OR THE HEART TO KNOCK A HUMAN BEING DOWN.
HOLD STILL, LITTLE DEMON! WE'RE TRYING TO HELP YOU.
DODGE RAM
THE TEAR GAS SEEPS THROUGH HIS CLOTHES. THEY ARE SOPPING WET WITH THE CHEMICALS AND HOLD THE BURNING TO HIS SKIN. WE MUST GET HIM UNDRESSED.
WHAT DO YOU THINK I'M TRYING TO DO? I'M LUCKY JUST TO KEEP A GRIP ON HIM.
HELP! HELP! HELP!
IF THE CALIBER IS LARGE ENOUGH, THE VELOCITY OF A BULLET NORMALLY FELLS THE PERSON IT HITS.
THE IMPACT OF A BULLET TEARING THROUGH A HAND CAN SEND A BODY INTO SHOCK AND SPIN IT VIOLENTLY ABOUT.
THE GREAT CAT KEEPS ITS EYES ON THE IMMEDIATE JEOPARDY--
--WHILE ITS INSTINCTS CENTER ON THE VIOLATION OF FLESH, THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE WOUND!
NOT DEEP.
THROUGH THE FLESHY PART OF THE RIGHT SIDE OF HIS WAIST.
CLEAN EXIT
AMAZING HOW MUCH BLOOD CAN FLOW FROM A SHALLOW WOUND.


THERE IS A SOUND MOST EARS WOULD NOT PICK UP BUT THE GREAT CAT CAN HEAR FLESH SLICING--
-A SOFT, LIQUIDY PUNCTURE STOPPED BY GLASS BREAKING AGAINST BONE!
CALM YOURSELF NOW
I...I STILL HA...HAVE EYES? YOU PROMISE?
OPEN THEM. IF YOU SEE ME, YOU MUST STILL HAVE EYES, RIGHT?
NO.
MY EYEBALLS AREN'T ATE? YOU RE FUZZY ...ARE YOU FUZZY?
WELL, I SEE YOU... FUZZY.
THEN, YOU STILL HAVE EYEBALLS, BAD ONES, SURELY, BUT STILL IN YOUR HEAD.
WHAT A THING TO TELL A CHILD. FOR SHAME DO YOU WANT TO SCARE HIM?
WHY'S IT STILL HURT? I'M TELLIN' YOU, IT STILL HURTS.
I BELIEVE YOU YOU THINK I FEEL GREAT?
SKR
RASHH

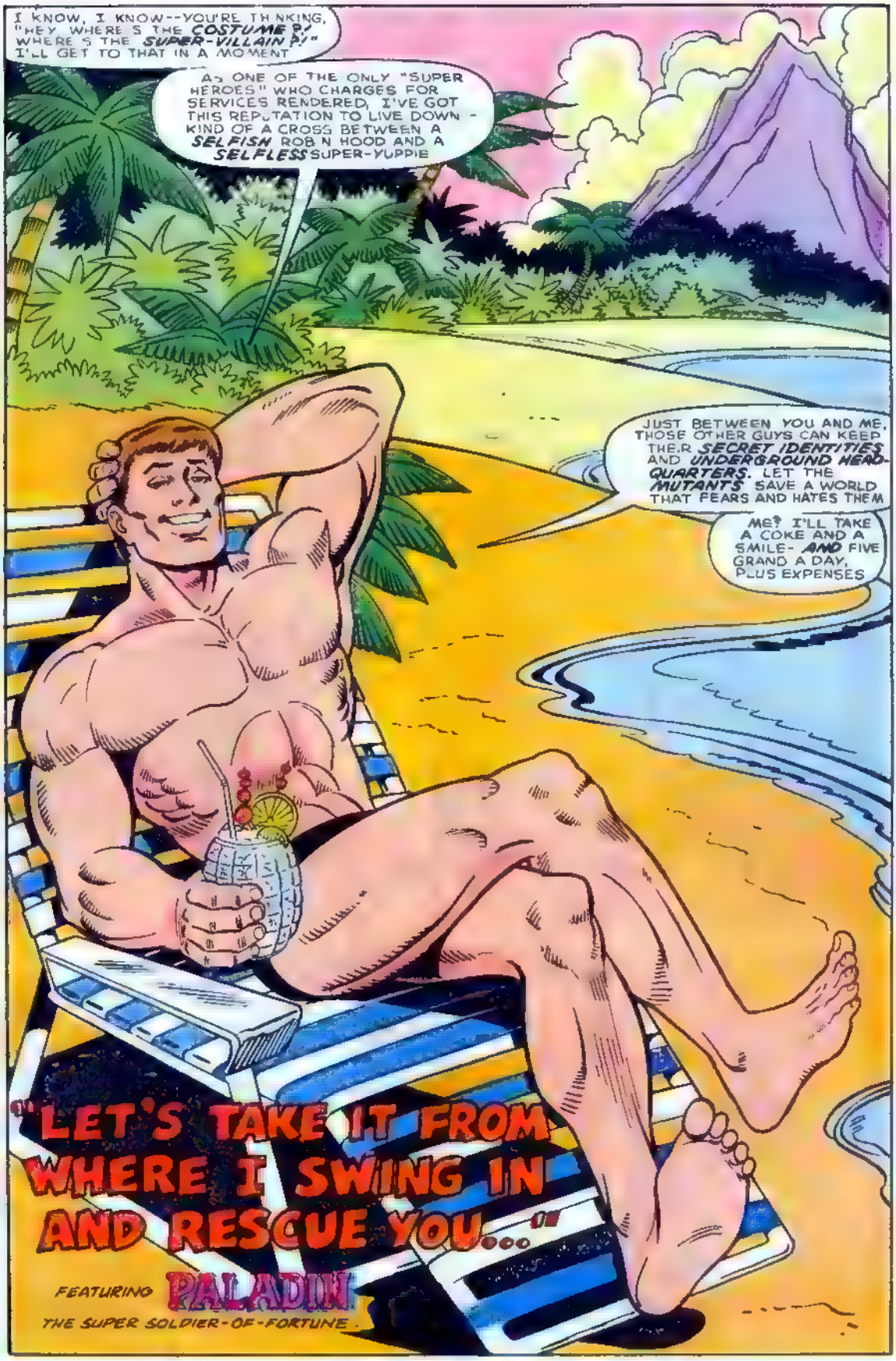
THE PANTHER HATES THE SOUND OF TEARING FLESH.
HE HAS HEARD THE SOFT TEARING OF FLESH BEFORE, SO QUIET LIKE A WHISPER CAPABLE OF DRAWING BL[illegible]
HE HATES THE SOUND OF CHILDREN SCREAMING. NOT CRYING, BUT SCREAMING IN AGONY.
WHUCK
THERE IS ONE SOUND HE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR, HIS MOTHER'S VOICE. HE WOULD NOT RECOGNIZE IT, EVEN IF SHE WERE HERE IN THIS GROUP OF PEOPLE AND SPOKE.
DID SHE SING HIM TO SLEEP?
ROCK HIM?
SUCKLE HIM?
IN THE MIDST OF NOONDAY VIOLENCE, IN THE HARSH LIGHT, FINDING HER SEEMS SUCH A REMOTE POSSIBILITY
ALMOST AS IF, AFTER SUCH FURIOUS EFFORT, [illegible] IS TRAVELLING FURTHER AWAY FROM A REUNION, AS IF HE HAS LOST HIS ORIGINAL INTENT--
--CAUGHT IN LARGER EVENTS THAN AN [illegible] AND SON.
MORE SOLDIERS ARE APPROACHING. WE MUST GET THE CHILD OUT OF HERE
IT IS BETTER IF YOU TAKE HIM.
YOU HAD BETTER BE SCARCE WHEN THEY GET HERE.
DON'T I KNOW IT.
I WOULD LIVE IN PEACE.

I WOULD TRY TO CONTROL MY ANGER. BUT THE CRIES OF CHILDREN, BURNED AND SCORCHED, CANNOT BE IGNORED!
NOW I ASK YOU TO GO ONE ON ONE...
...MAN TO MAN...
...NOT AS A FORCE OF MECHANIZED BRUTALITY SAVAGING A QUIET MIDDAY...
...BUT AS TWO MEN...A MAN OF HATE WHO NOW FACES A MAN OF PEACE.
FOR IN THE END THAT IS WHAT IT WILL COME DOWN TO...
NOT INDIANS, ZULUS, XHOSA, AFRIKANERS, EUROPEANS, FOREIGNERS..
...IT WILL COME DOWN TO PEOPLE OF PEACE AND RESPECT FOR ONE ANOTHER...
...AGAINST PEOPLE OF HATE AND IGNORANCE, WHO THINK THEY ARE SUPERIOR TO ANY OTHER PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE RACE THEY WERE BORN INTO!
NOT MUCH TIME TO FIND A HIDING PLACE. REINFORCEMENT TROOPS ALREADY IN VIEW. UNDER THE DEMOLISHED TEAR GAS TRUCK IS AS GOOD A PLACE AS ANY. THEY WILL SPOT HIM FOR SURE IF HE TRIES TO FLEE.

WHAT IS THIS GUY RAVING ABOUT, VAN DER MERWE WONDERS BRIEFLY.
MEN OF HATE... PEACE... MECHANIZED WHAT?
MAN DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE.
PROBABLY SOME WEIRD COMMUNIST INSPIRED GUERRILLA FIGHTER JUSTIFYING AN ASSAULT ON CIVILIZED AUTHORITY.
THE TENSION BETWEEN THE TWO MEN IS PALPABLE, AND VAN DER MERWE IS VERY ALIVE WITH THAT AWARENESS.
INDISPUTABLY, THE POWER OF THE MAN RADIATES OUTWARD, AND VAN DER MERWE KNOWS HE MUST NOT WAVER.
HE MUST HAVE TOTAL CONVICTION HE CAN AIM HIS WEAPON BEFORE THE TERRORIST STRIKES.
INDECISIVENESS IN SUCH A SITUATION CAN GET YOU KILLED!
GET UP!
WHUCT
YOU WATCHED LITTLE CHILDREN FALL--
--AND THEY MANAGED TO GET UP.
NOW, LET US SEE IF YOU CAN DO WHAT LITTLE CHILDREN HAD TO DO BECAUSE OF YOU!

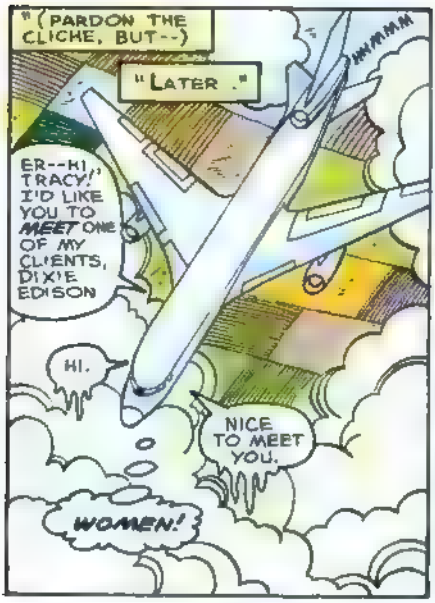
LIKE A GORED MATADOR ELUDING A MADDENED BULL--
--A QUICK, GRACEFUL MOVE AND THE ATTACKER IS AT HIS MERCY.
WHAT... ARE YOU GOING TO...?
YOU'RE NOT...
DON'T!
CLAP
CLAP
THE NEXT TIME YOU ARE JUST FOLLOWING ORDERS ...AND YOU SEE SMALL CHILDREN...
...REMEMBER THIS!
TOO MUCH OF THAT GAS WILL DO MORE THAN MAKE YOU CRY.
IT COULD KILL YOU.
oh please oh please oh please
WE WOULD NOT WANT THAT TO HAPPEN, WOULD WE?
DO YOU THINK ANY CHILD EVER DIED FROM GAS YOU SPRAYED INDISCRIMINATELY?
make it stop please stop
LOOK OUT! BEHIND YOU!
THE PANTHER WHIRLS--
--REALIZING IMMEDIATELY THAT HE IS CAUGHT DEAD IN HIS TRACKS!

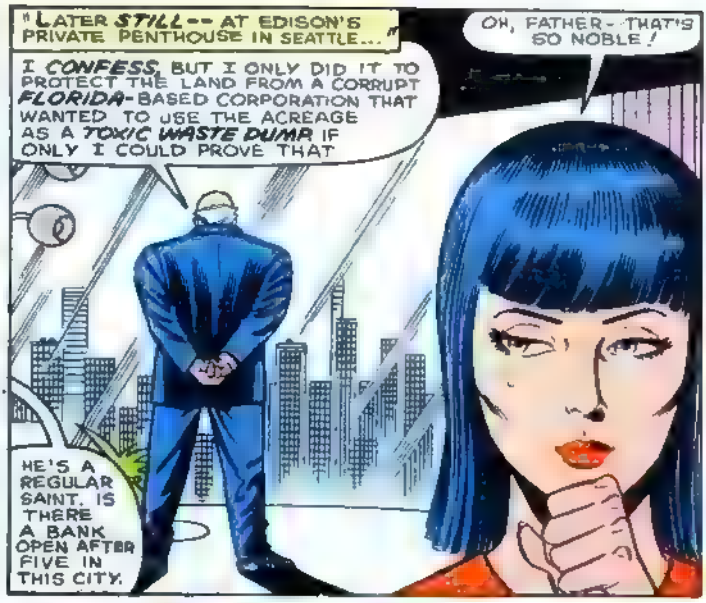
CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE. .

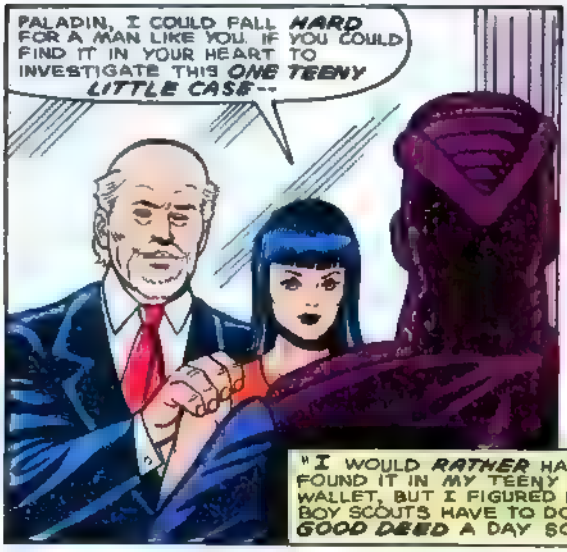

I KNOW, I KNOW--YOU'RE THINKING, "HEY, WHERE'S THE COSTUME?! WHERE'S THE SUPER-VILLAIN?!" I'LL GET TO THAT IN A MOMENT
AS ONE OF THE ONLY "SUPER HEROES" WHO CHARGES FOR SERVICES RENDERED, I'VE GOT THIS REPUTATION TO LIVE DOWN - KIND OF A CROSS BETWEEN A SELFISH ROBIN HOOD AND A SELFLESS SUPER-YUPPIE
JUST BETWEEN YOU AND ME, THOSE OTHER GUYS CAN KEEP THEIR SECRET IDENTITIES AND UNDERGROUND HEADQUARTERS. LET THE MUTANTS SAVE A WORLD THAT FEARS AND HATES THEM
ME? I'LL TAKE A COKE AND A SMILE- AND FIVE GRAND A DAY, PLUS EXPENSES
"LET'S TAKE IT FROM WHERE I SWING IN AND RESCUE YOU..."
FEATURING PALADIN
THE SUPER SOLDIER-OF-FORTUNE

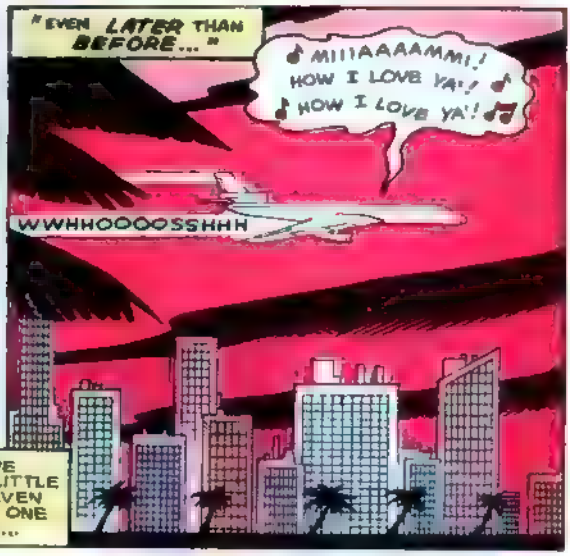
"I FLEW, FIRST CLASS, INTO CHICAGO, TO MEET THE WINDY CITY'S MOST PROMINENT NEWSPAPER MAGNATE.
VROOOOOM
"HE WAS DISTRAUGHT OVER THE KIDNAPING OF HIS DAUGHTER BY A GROUP OF URBAN TERRORISTS.
PAN AM
"THAT'S ME, THE GUY IN THE PURPLE UMPIRE'S SUIT. PRETTY RADICAL THREADS, HUH?"
PALADIN, I'M NEWSPAPER PUBLISHER, EMMETTE EDISON. I'M DISTRAUGHT OVER THE KIDNAPING OF MY DAUGHTER BY TERRORISTS.
"TOLD YOU SO! TOLD YOU SO!"
THE RANSOM NOTE DEMANDS THAT I LIQUIDATE MY ASSETS AND GIVE MY MONEY TO THE POOR.
THEN SOMEBODY WOULD JUST KIDNAP THEIR DAUGHTERS AND FORCE THEM TO LIQUIDATE THEIR ASSETS AND-- YOU GET THE IDEA.
IT'D BE BEST FOR EVERYONE INVOLVED IF I JUST RESCUED HER
HERE'S A PICTURE OF MY BELOVED DIXIE. THE POSTMARK ON THE TERRORISTS' DEMANDS INDICATES SHE'S BEING HELD IN DALLAS.
DALLAS?! WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME THAT OVER THE PHONE?
YOUR FULL-PAGE AD IN THE TIMES SPECIFICALLY STATES YOU'LL "TRAVEL TO THE FOUR CORNERS OF THE WORLD TO SOLVE A CASE."
TRUE, BUT I DIDN'T MEAN ALL IN ONE DAY.
DALLAS, HUH? JUST AS WELL--IT'S PROBABLY WHERE MY LUGGAGE WOUND UP ANYWAY
"OBVIOUSLY THIS GUY NEVER HEARD OF CREATIVE ADVERTISING."

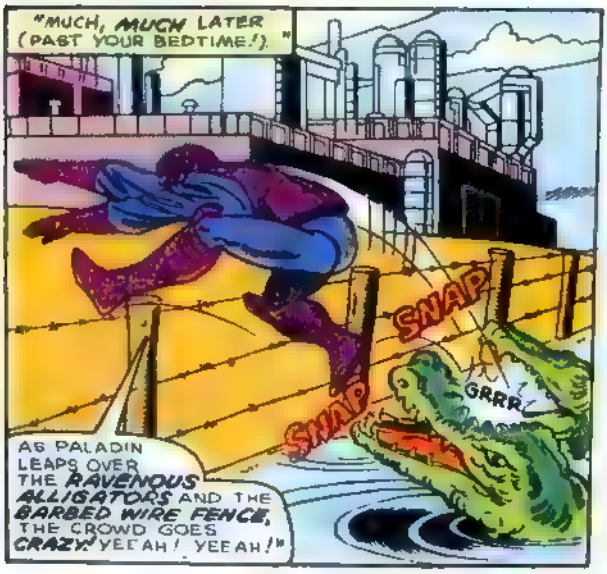
MR. PALADIN, WE'RE ABOUT TO LAND IN DALLAS. CAN I GET YOU ANYTHING--COFFEE, TEA, MY PHONE NUMBER?
THAT WOULD BE NICE, MISS--?
TRACY, BUT YOU CAN CALL ME ANYTIME
SHUSHH
"ALTHOUGH I NORMALLY HAVE TO TWIST A FEW ARMS TO GET SOME ANSWERS...
"... I GOT THE IMPRESSION FROM THE SUSPICIOUS WAY EMMETTE'S CHAUFFEUR WAS STARING--
GATE 1
REGENCY
GRANDOM
CTE
--THAT I'D HAVE NO PROBLEM LOCATING THE TERRORISTS.
"OF COURSE--I DIDN'T THINK IT'D BE THAT EASY."
PALADIN
PALADIN
PALADIN
PALADIN, I WAS ONLY POSTPONING TO BE KIDNAPED BECAUSE MY FATHER REFUSES TO RETURN THOUSANDS OF ACRES OF LAND TO FARMERS IN SEATTLE, WASHINGTON!
HE LETS THEM RENT THE LAND, BUT BY RIGHTS--
LOOK, I'M NOT REAL BIG ON POLITICS. I'M HERE TO RESCUE YOU.
B-BUT YOU'RE A SUPER HERO WITH GREAT POWER I THOUGHT THAT WITH GREAT POWER CAME GREAT RESPONSIBILITY!
YOU'RE THINKING OF SOMEONE ELSE
IF YOU TAKE THIS CASE I'LL PAY YOU DOUBLE YOUR NORMAL RATE!
NOW--I CAN PRESS ONE TOO, SO I SUGGEST YOU LET GO OF THAT RAIL, UNLESS, OF COURSE, YOU PLAN ON TAKING IT WITH US
AIRLINE 7
GATE 4
IF YOU INSIST--MA'AM, I'D LIKE TWO TICKETS TO SEATTLE.
SMOKING OR NON-SMOKING?
PTING
RACCARACCA
BRACCARACCA


"(PARDON THE CLICHE, BUT--)
"LATER."
MMMMM
ER--HI, TRACY! I'D LIKE YOU TO MEET ONE OF MY CLIENTS, DIXIE EDISON
HI.
NICE TO MEET YOU.
WOMEN!


"LATER STILL-- AT EDISON'S PRIVATE PENTHOUSE IN SEATTLE..."
I CONFESS, BUT I ONLY DID IT TO PROTECT THE LAND FROM A CORRUPT FLORIDA-BASED CORPORATION THAT WANTED TO USE THE ACREAGE AS A TOXIC WASTE DUMP IF ONLY I COULD PROVE THAT
OH, FATHER--THAT'S SO NOBLE!
HE'S A REGULAR SAINT. IS THERE A BANK OPEN AFTER FIVE IN THIS CITY.


PALADIN, I COULD FALL HARD FOR A MAN LIKE YOU. IF YOU COULD FIND IT IN YOUR HEART TO INVESTIGATE THIS ONE TEENY LITTLE CASE--
"I WOULD RATHER HAVE FOUND IT IN MY TEENY LITTLE WALLET, BUT I FIGURED EVEN BOY SCOUTS HAVE TO DO ONE GOOD DEED A DAY SO..."

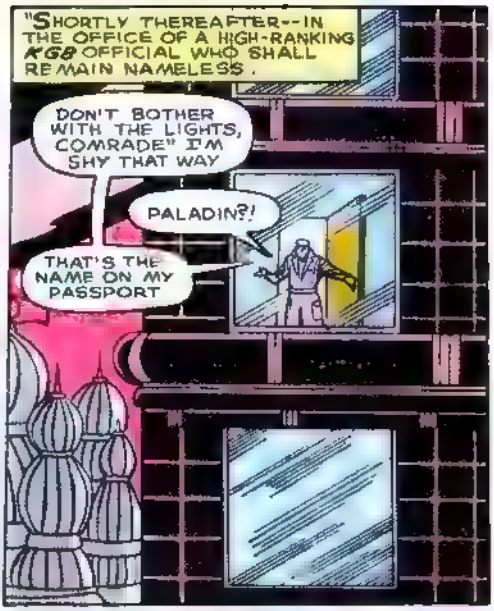

"EVEN LATER THAN BEFORE..."
♪ MIIIAAAAMMI! HOW I LOVE YA! ♪ ♪ HOW I LOVE YA! ♪
WWHHOOOOSSHHH

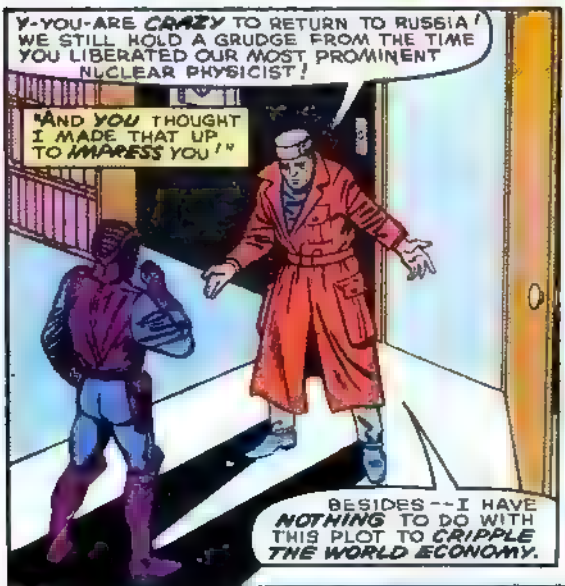

"MUCH, MUCH LATER (PAST YOUR BEDTIME!)."
SNAP
SNAP
GRRR
AS PALADIN LEAPS OVER THE RAVENOUS ALLIGATORS AND THE BARBED WIRE FENCE, THE CROWD GOES CRAZY! YEEAH! YEEAH!"

"VERY, VERY LA--YOU GET THE IDEA!"
YAK
BUT PALADIN, THIS ISN'T OUR FAULT! WE'RE BEING BLACKMAILED BY A EUROPEAN CRIME SYNDICATE ATTEMPTING TO SWITCH AMERICA'S AGRICULTURAL DEPENDENCY TO TURKEY!
YEAH, YEAH--DO YOU HAVE AN ADDRESS FOR THESE PEOPLE?

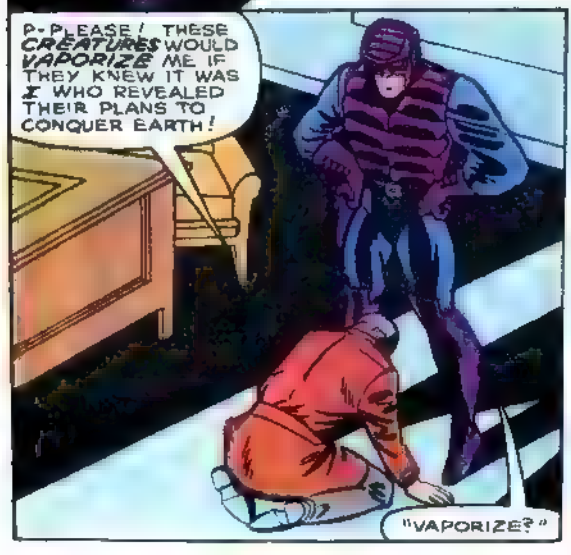
"A FUNNY THING HAPPENED TO ME ON THE WAY TO EUROPE"
EVERYONE FREEZE! I'M HIJACKING THIS PLANE! I WANT
WALK
MMM
YEEAH! YEEAH!
MMMMM
I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU PEOPLE WOULD CONSIDER TAKING UP A COLLECTION?
"IN ITALY, THEY SAY THAT WHEN THE MOON HITS YOUR EYE LIKE A BIG PIZZA PIE, THAT'S AMORE!
KE-RASHK
"I DON'T THINK THEY HAVE A WORD FOR WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A SUPER SOLDIER-OF-FORTUNE CRASHES YOUR WEDDING RECEPTION."
PATRIARCH! I WANT ANSWERS! WHY ARE YOU BLACK-MAILING A CORPORATION INTO--
--INTO POISONING VAST AMOUNTS OF AMERICAN FARMLAND? I'M GLAD YOU ASKED, PALADIN.
THE FAMILY IS BEING PRESSURED BY RENEGADE KGB AGENTS INTENT ON CRIPPLING THE WORLD ECONOMY
"RENEGADE KGB AGENTS" --AS IN RUSSIA; RIGHT?
RIGHT.
I'D LIKE TO STAY AND CHAT, BUT I'M HOPING MY SEAT ON THE PLANE IS STILL WARM. SORRY ABOUT THE MESS
NONSENSE, SON! YOU'LL INSULT ME IF YOU DON'T STAY AND ENJOY MY DAUGHTER'S WEDDING CELEBRATION.
I SUPPOSE ONE LITTLE DANCE CAN'T HURT.
PSSST! I'M HONEYMOONING IN THE BAHAMAS-- IF YOU'RE AROUND..
"THEN AGAIN..."

"FIVE YEARS AGO I LIBERATED RUSSIA'S MOST PROMINENT NUCLEAR PHYSICIST AND THESE GUYS STILL HOLD A GRUDGE."
BUPPPA
BUPPPA
BUPPPA
GIVE ME A CALL WHEN YOU GET SETTLED IN!


"SHORTLY THEREAFTER--IN THE OFFICE OF A HIGH-RANKING KGB OFFICIAL WHO SHALL REMAIN NAMELESS.
DON'T BOTHER WITH THE LIGHTS, COMRADE" I'M SHY THAT WAY
PALADIN?!
THAT'S THE NAME ON MY PASSPORT


Y-YOU-ARE CRAZY TO RETURN TO RUSSIA! WE STILL HOLD A GRUDGE FROM THE TIME YOU LIBERATED OUR MOST PROMINENT NUCLEAR PHYSICIST!
"AND YOU THOUGHT I MADE THAT UP TO IMPRESS YOU!"
BESIDES--I HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS PLOT TO CRIPPLE THE WORLD ECONOMY.

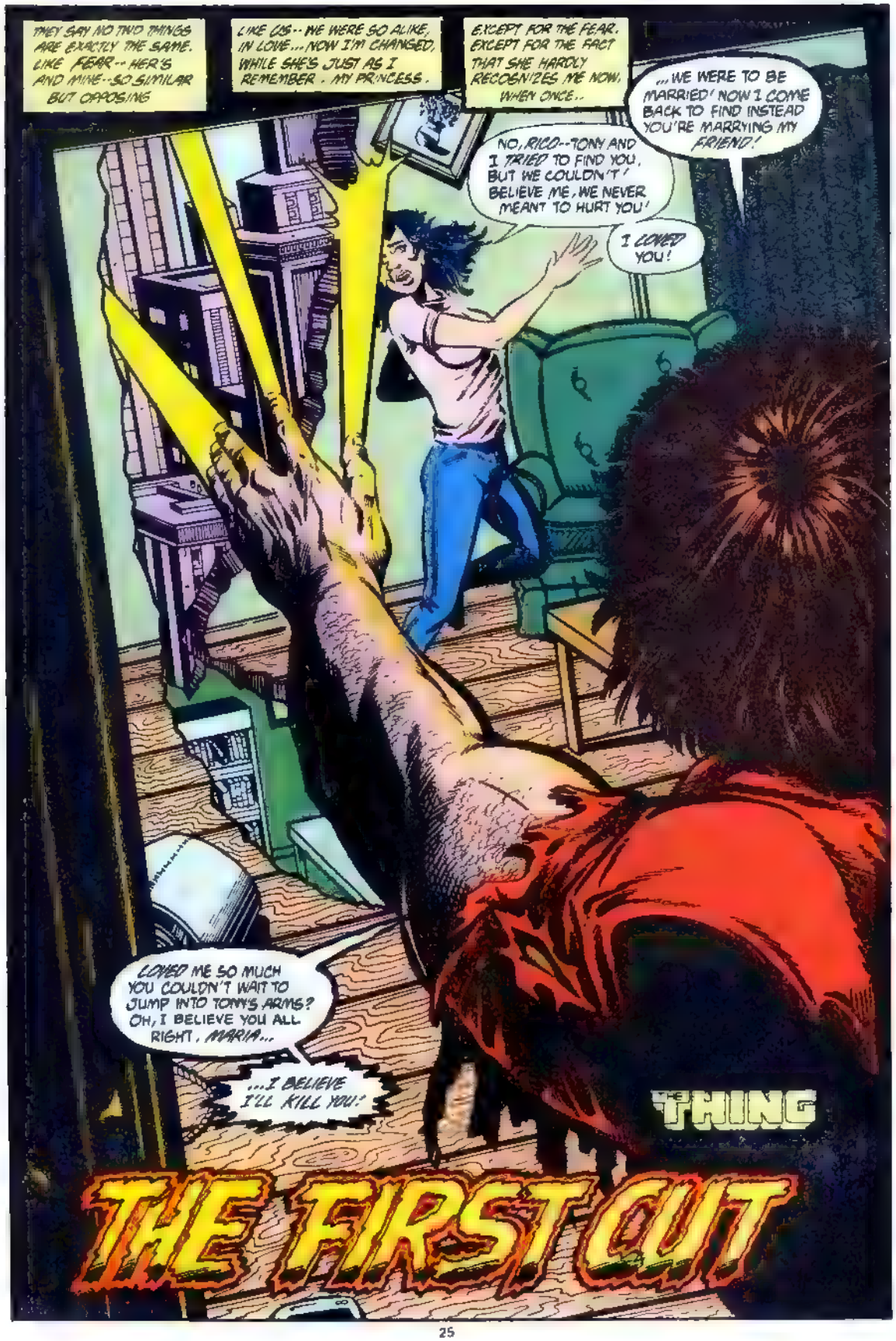
FUNNY--I DON'T REMEMBER SAYING ANYTHING ABOUT A PLOT TO CRIPPLE THE WORLD ECONOMY
ACTUALLY, I JUST CAME BY TO BUM SOME TICKETS TO THE BALLET
KLIK


P-PLEASE! THESE CREATURES WOULD VAPORIZE ME IF THEY KNEW IT WAS I WHO REVEALED THEIR PLANS TO CONQUER EARTH!
"VAPORIZE?"

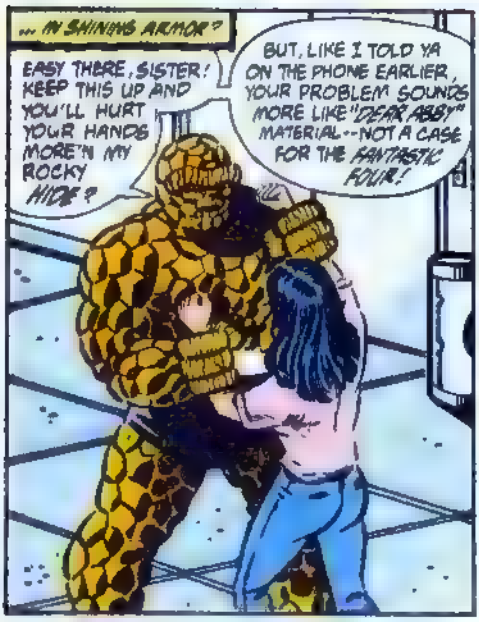
YES! THEY ARE A GROUP OF INTERGALACTIC WARLORDS WHO PLAN TO USE OUR PLANET AS AN ARMORY FOR--
--AS AN ARMORY FOR..
PALADIN--ARE...YOU SOBBING?!

"ANY OTHER ALIEN INVASION WOULD HAVE SETTLED ON A WHEAT FIELD IN KANSAS. NATURALLY MY GUYS DECIDED TO HANG-OUT IN THE ANTARCTIC!
BRRRRRRRRRRRR
"TRUST ME--YOU HAVEN'T LIVED UNTIL YOU'VE FLOWN FIRST CLASS TO THE SOUTH POLE..."
OH, MY...
...A TRACTOR BEAM TO HAUL IN UNEXPECTED VISITORS--
--HOW ORIGINAL
"MOMENTS LATER I WAS TAKEN TO THEIR LEADER."
WE'VE BEEN MONITORING YOUR EVERY MOVE SINCE YOUR FLIGHT TO CHICAGO. WE'VE BEEN THOROUGHLY AMUSED!
THEN YOU PROBABLY SAW ME STOP AT THAT PHONE BOOTH BEFORE I LEFT MOSCOW?
"PHONE BOOTH?"
IT'S A DEVICE WE HUMANS USE TO CALL EACH OTHER.
WE CAN DIAL OUT FOR PIZZA, THE WEATHER, THE CAVALRY...
"CAVALRY?"
YOU KNOW, LIKE THE AVENGERS
CH-LUNK
IN FACT, THAT'S PROBABLY THEM NOW.
VRA-SHROOMK!
AND THAT SOUNDED LIKE THE FANTASTIC FOUR'S POGO-PLANE
THUMP!
I'M NOT SURE--BUT THAT'S EITHER ALPHA FLIGHT OR THE SOVIET SUPER SOLDIERS.
=ULP!=

DON'T GIVE ME THAT LOOK! I KNOW WHEN I'M OUT-CLASSED. THE BOTTOM LINE WAS--WHO'S GOING TO FOOT THE BILL FOR "THWARTING AN INTERGALACTIC INVASION?"
THE U.N.? I DOUBT IT
AS IT WAS, I DIDN'T GET PAID FOR ANYTHING I DID AFTER I RESCUED DIXIE I GUESS I JUST GOT CAUGHT UP IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT.
AH, WHO AM I KIDDING?! THIS SUPER HERO THING CAN' BE A LOT OF FUN IF YOU DON'T TAKE IT TOO SERIOUSLY.
NOW YOU'RE THINKING, "HEY, IF YOU DIDN'T GET PAID, HOW CAN YOU AFFORD THIS GREAT VACATION?!"
PALADIN--LOOK OUT!
BONK
I EARNED THIS VACATION WITH MY FREQUENT FLYER MILEAGE POINTS!
WHO WERE YOU TALKING TO JUST NOW?
ER--NO ONE, TRACY. RACE YOU TO THE WATER?!
NOW YOU BETTER RUN AHEAD TO THE NEXT STORY--
--I GET TIME-AND-A-HALF TO BATTLE THE COMICS CODE!
THE END


THEY SAY NO TWO THINGS ARE EXACTLY THE SAME. LIKE FEAR--HER'S AND MINE--SO SIMILAR BUT OPPOSING
LIKE US--WE WERE SO ALIKE, IN LOVE...NOW I'M CHANGED, WHILE SHE'S JUST AS I REMEMBER. MY PRINCESS.
EXCEPT FOR THE FEAR. EXCEPT FOR THE FACT THAT SHE HARDLY RECOGNIZES ME NOW, WHEN ONCE..
...WE WERE TO BE MARRIED! NOW I COME BACK TO FIND INSTEAD YOU'RE MARRYING MY FRIEND!
NO, RICO--TONY AND I TRIED TO FIND YOU, BUT WE COULDN'T! BELIEVE ME, WE NEVER MEANT TO HURT YOU!
I LOVED YOU!
LOVED ME SO MUCH YOU COULDN'T WAIT TO JUMP INTO TONY'S ARMS? OH, I BELIEVE YOU ALL RIGHT, MARIA...
...I BELIEVE I'LL KILL YOU!
THING
THE FIRST CUT

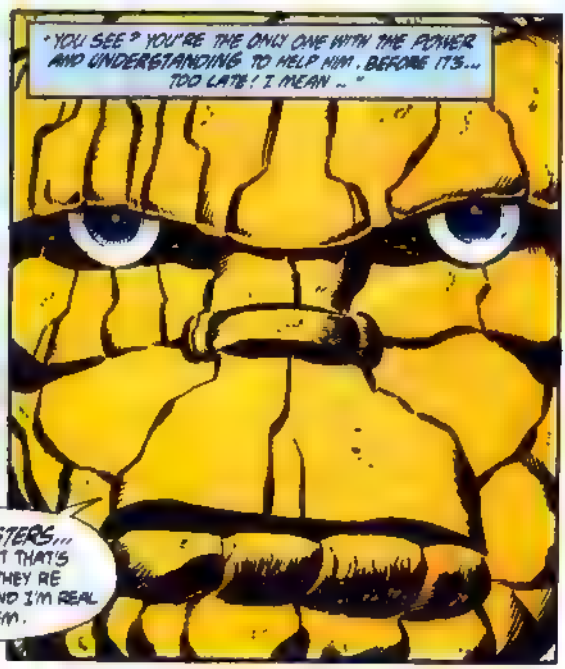
BUT NOT YET
I WANT YOU TO KNOW FIRST HOW IT FEELS TO BE ALONE AND HELPLESS. TONY CAN'T HELP YOU--I TOOK CARE OF HIM FIRST
WHO CAN YOU RUN TO NOW, PRINCESS? WHO WILL BE YOUR KNIGHT...
44


... IN SHINING ARMOR?
EASY THERE, SISTER! KEEP THIS UP AND YOU'LL HURT YOUR HANDS MORE'N MY ROCKY HIDE?
BUT, LIKE I TOLD YA ON THE PHONE EARLIER, YOUR PROBLEM SOUNDS MORE LIKE "DEAR ABBY" MATERIAL--NOT A CASE FOR THE FANTASTIC FOUR!

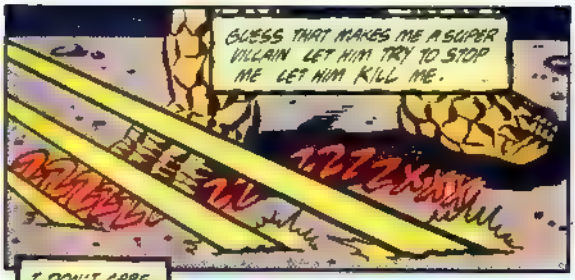
BUT I DIDN'T COME FOR THE F.F., MISTER... THING I'VE COME FOR YOUR HELP--AND ONLY YOU!
RICO HAD BEEN MISSING FOR OVER A YEAR, AND AFTER A WHILE I JUST ACCEPTED THAT HE WAS DEAD, OR DIDN'T WANT TO BE FOUND BUT NOW HE'S BACK, AND VERY DANGEROUS!

SOMETHING HAPPENED TO HIM WHILE HE WAS GONE--CHANGING HIM, IN BODY AND MIND, IN WAYS I COULDN'T TELL THE POLICE.
HE HAS WEIRD POWER NOW WITH A GESTURE, HE CUT MY CHEEK--BUT IT MIGHT'VE BEEN MY HEAD IF I HADN'T FALLEN! HE'S MORE THAN A MATCH FOR NORMAL POLICE!

PLEASE--I READ A WHILE BACK THAT YOU DISAPPEARED FOR A TIME, AND WHEN YOU RETURNED, YOUR TEAMMATE, THE HUMAN TORCH, WAS ENGAGED TO YOUR GIRL... ALICE, UH..
ALICIA MASTERS... STORM YEAH, BUT THAT'S ALL LONG PAST. THEY'RE MARRIED NOW, AND I'M REAL HAPPY FOR 'EM.

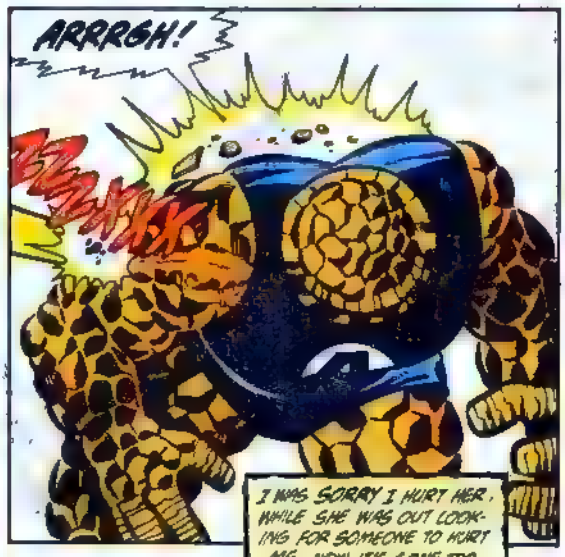

"YOU SEE? YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE WITH THE POWER AND UNDERSTANDING TO HELP HIM. BEFORE IT'S... TOO LATE! I MEAN.."

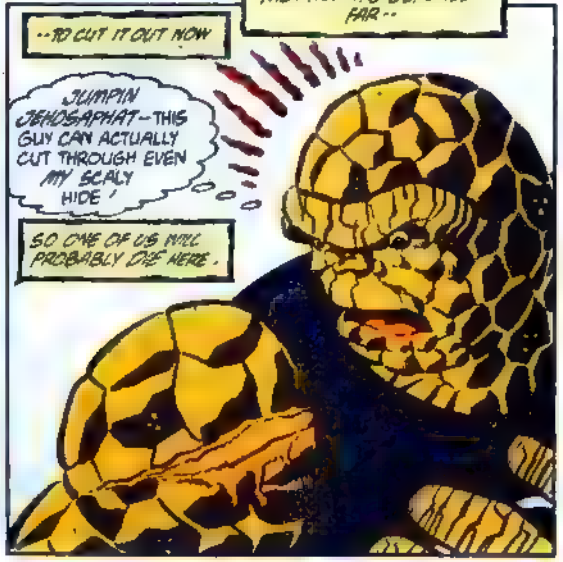
"...YOU GOT OVER THAT PAIN ONCE, TOO, DIDN'T YOU?"
IT'S NOT LIKE I GOT ANYTHING TO PROVE. THIS'S GOOD P.R. FOR THE F.F.!
AW WHO'M I KIDDIN'? THE BOTTOM LINE IS I DO GOT SOMETHIN' TO PROVE -- THAT I CAN HELP SOMEBODY DO SOMETHING I'M NOT SURE I DID...
DO NOT ENTER
CONDEMNED
...TO BOUNCE BACK WHEN LOVE GIVES YOU A KICK IN THE...
CONDEMNED
...BACK DOOR?
THE THING!
UH-UH, GUYS! NO FIREWORKS IN THE CITY LIMITS -- 'SPECIALLY NOT THE LETHAL KIND!
WHAT SAY YOU DROP THOSE LITTLE PEASHOOTERS WITH THE COP TWO BLOCKS DOWN...
...BEFORE I DISMANTLE THEM -- AND YOU!
YUP YUP YUP YUP...
HE DOES NICE WORK
THANKS FOR THE IMPRESSIVE -- THOUGH UNINVITED -- HOUSECLEANING. NOW YOU ARE INVITED --
...TO LEAVE!
I'M THE TOUGH GUY I'M THE CUTTING EDGE
YOU'RE RICO. I'M HERE TO TALK TO YOU
HE'S THE ONE MARIA FOUND A REAL SUPER HERO.
RICO'S DEAD. THEY KILLED HIM. I'M THE RIPPER!

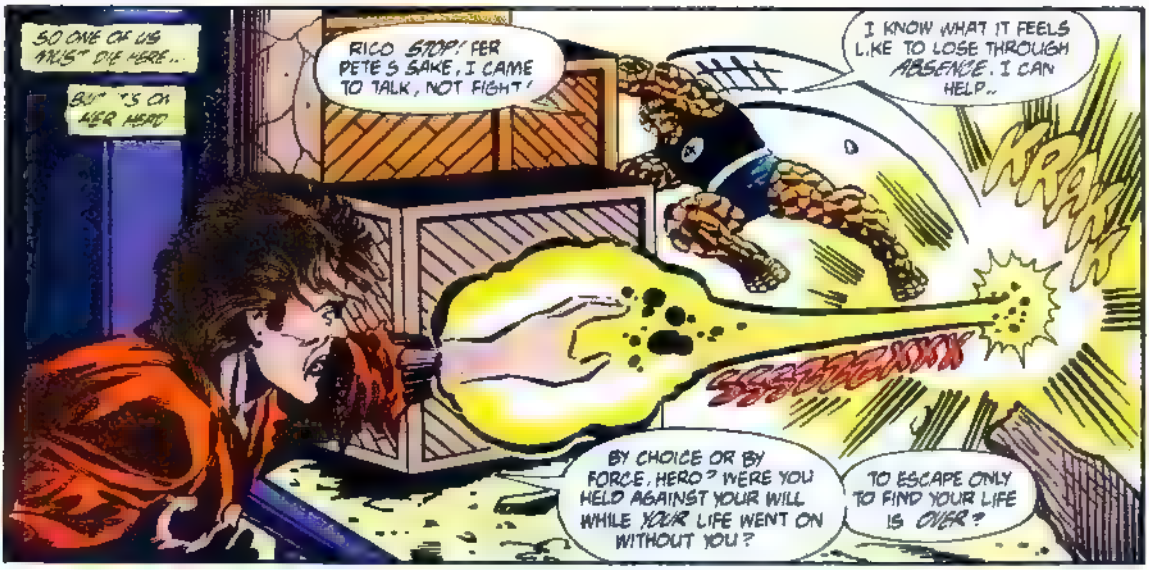

GUESS THAT MAKES ME A SUPER VILLAIN. LET HIM TRY TO STOP ME. LET HIM KILL ME.

I DON'T CARE
KARUSH

BEAMS FROM HIS HAND-- CUT THE FLOOR AWAY BEFORE I COULD REACT! HE'S EVERY BIT AS POWERFUL AS MARIA SAID...
...AND EVERY BIT AS NUTS!
THIS WHOLE SITUATION IS CRAZY.


ARRRGH!
I WAS SORRY I HURT HER, WHILE SHE WAS OUT LOOKING FOR SOMEONE TO HURT ME. NOW IT'S GONE TOO FAR--


--TO CUT IT OUT NOW
JUMPIN JEHOSAPHAT--THIS GUY CAN ACTUALLY CUT THROUGH EVEN MY SCALY HIDE!
SO ONE OF US WILL PROBABLY DIE HERE.


SO ONE OF US MUST DIE HERE..
BUT IT'S ON HER HEAD
RICO STOP! FER PETE'S SAKE, I CAME TO TALK, NOT FIGHT!
I KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO LOSE THROUGH ABSENCE. I CAN HELP..
KRAK
SSSSHHKKKK
BY CHOICE OR BY FORCE, HERO? WERE YOU HELD AGAINST YOUR WILL WHILE YOUR LIFE WENT ON WITHOUT YOU?
TO ESCAPE ONLY TO FIND YOUR LIFE IS OVER?

YOU WANT TO HELP?
OH YEAH, EVERYBODY WANTS TO HELP POOR RICO! THEY OFFERED HELP IN THE FORM OF CASH I NEEDED TO SETTLE DOWN WITH MARIA--
--IN EXCHANGE FOR TAKING A COUPLE OF TESTS-- A WEEK OUT OF MY LIFE...

...THAT TURNED INTO A MONTH OF JABBING, POKING INJECTIONS, INTO A YEAR OF OPERATIONS AND IMPRISONMENT!
DAVE SIM
TERRY
ZECK
YOU WERE KIDNAPED? BY WHO?
THE FOUNDATION! THAT'S ALL I KNEW THEM AS!
THEY SAID I WAS THE CULMINATION OF THEIR EXPERIMENTS IN CONTROLLING UNSTABLE MOLECULES!

THE FIRST OF A NEW GENERATION TO SAFEGUARD HUMANITY AGAINST THE GROWING NUMBERS OF POWERED MUTANTS...
...AND SO CALLED HEROES-- LIKE YOURSELF
4
CLOSER TO HIM-- WITHOUT GETTIN MY HEAD LOPPED OFF!

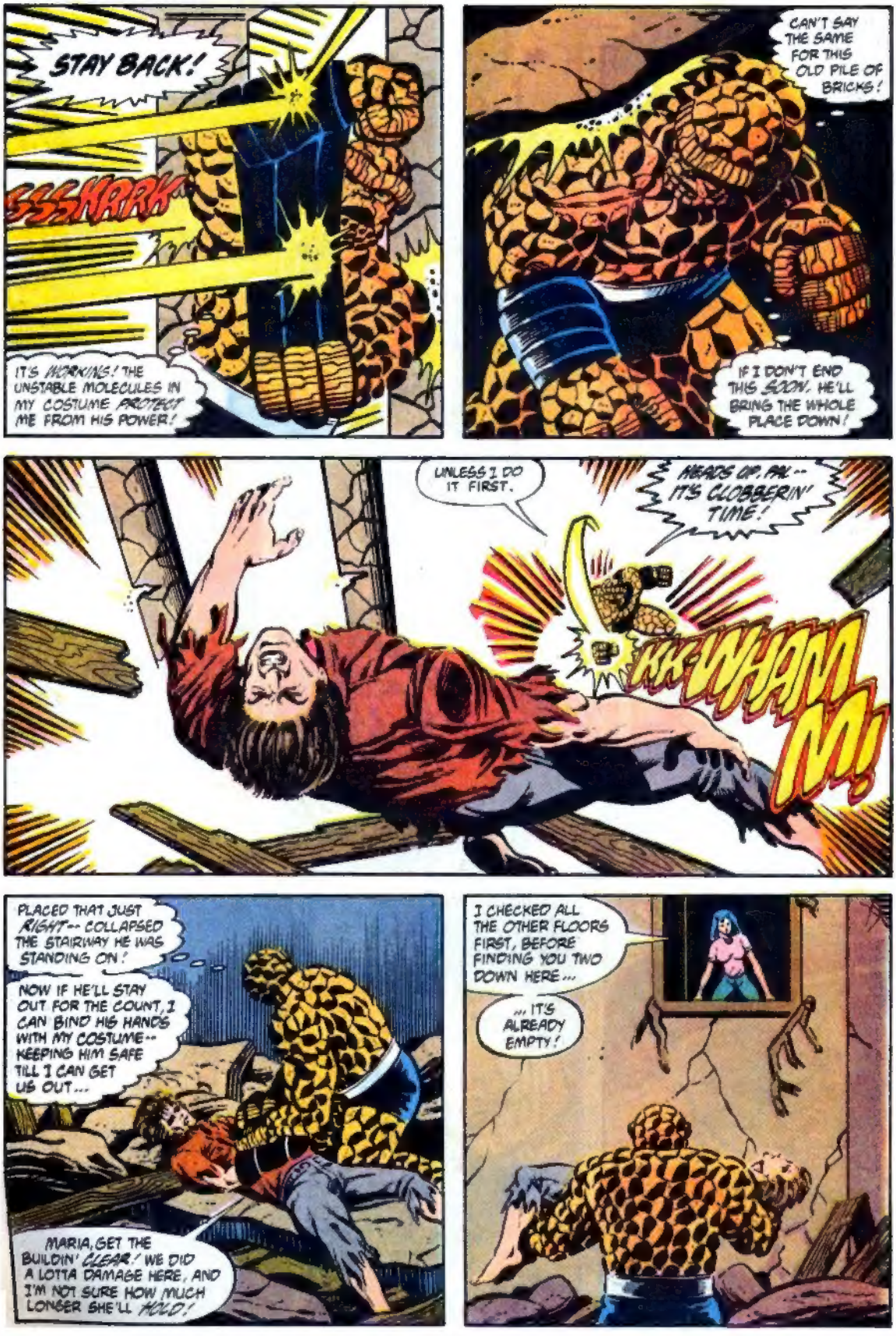
HIS POWER CUT MY ARM UP TO MY SHIRT! UNSTABLE MOLECULES MUST HAVE SOMETHIN' TO DO WITH IT--
--MY A.F. TOGS'RE MADE OUT OF THE SAME STUFF HE GETS HIS POWERS FROM!
MAYBE THIS'LL HELP ME T'GET CLOSE ENOUGH TO REASON WITH HIM...
RICO, WHOEVER KIDNAPPED YOU IS THE REAL CRIMINAL HERE! BELIEVE ME, I KNOW WHAT'S TEARIN' YOU UP!
BELIEVE HIM?

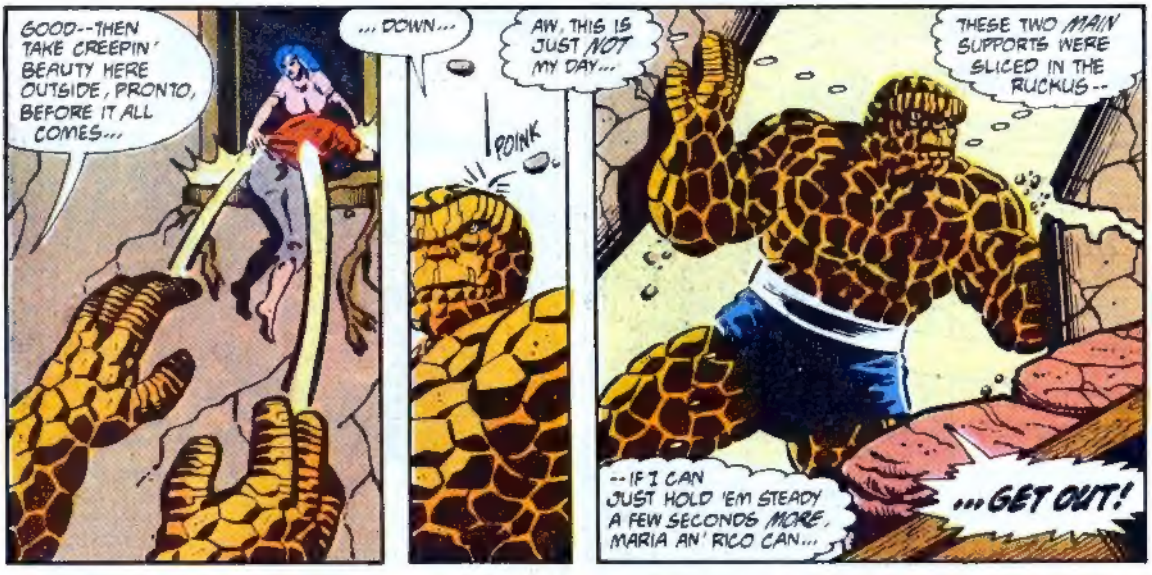
I LOVED A GAL ONCE, WHO I FELT WAS BETTER'N I DESERVED. THINKING NOW, TRUTH WAS I JUST COULDN'T BELIEVE IN HER.
SOMETIMES BELIEVING'S THE HARDEST THING TO DO. BUT GIVIN' UP CAN MAKE YA CRAZY.

I KNOW. I BEEN THERE.
THEY SAY NO TWO THINGS ARE EXACTLY THE SAME...

YOU'RE TRYING TO CONFUSE ME!
NO, RICO, HE'S TRYING TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND...
SSHHRRRRR

MARIA!
I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENED TO YOU, BUT I'M SICK OF BEING A STRANGER TO SOMEONE I WAS SO CLOSE TO...
...I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU HATE ME THIS MUCH.
BUT IF SHE'S WRONG, SHE'S DEAD!
BRAVE-- A LOT LIKE ALICIA... BUT NUTS! THE RIPPER'S TOO UNSTABLE! GOT TO...


STAY BACK!
SSSHARK
IT'S WORKING! THE UNSTABLE MOLECULES IN MY COSTUME PROTECT ME FROM HIS POWER!
CAN'T SAY THE SAME FOR THIS OLD PILE OF BRICKS!
IF I DON'T END THIS SOON, HE'LL BRING THE WHOLE PLACE DOWN!
UNLESS I DO IT FIRST.
HEADS UP, PAL -- IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME!
KK-WHAM
PLACED THAT JUST RIGHT -- COLLAPSED THE STAIRWAY HE WAS STANDING ON!
NOW IF HE'LL STAY OUT FOR THE COUNT, I CAN BIND HIS HANDS WITH MY COSTUME -- KEEPING HIM SAFE TILL I CAN GET US OUT...
MARIA, GET THE BUILDIN' CLEAR! WE DID A LOTTA DAMAGE HERE, AND I'M NOT SURE HOW MUCH LONGER SHE'LL HOLD!
I CHECKED ALL THE OTHER FLOORS FIRST, BEFORE FINDING YOU TWO DOWN HERE...
...IT'S ALREADY EMPTY!



THROUGH DULL HAZE, I FEEL HER ARMS AROUND ME AGAIN...
SO MUCH LIKE THE FIRST TIME WE TOUCHED...
...FIREWORKS...
RRRR

THE THING
AND THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN . . .
4
PALADIN
AROUND THE WORLD IN 8 PAGES!
BLACK PANTHER
CORNERED!